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What Shouldn't Make the Cut on Your Holiday Menu

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Chief petty officers aboard the Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruiser USS Mobile Bay (CG 53) prepare dinner for a postponed Thanksgiving meal. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Armando Gonzales/Released)

A good time can be had by all as long as you don't get yourself or others sick. Nothing can be more devastating then knowing that you hosted the family or neighborhood foodborne illness party.

Preventing foodborne illness is not complicated. However, it does take knowing and understanding the barriers that need to be put into place to prevent your friends, colleagues, and loved ones from becoming ill.

[The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) estimates that each year roughly one in six Americans (or 48 million people) get sick, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die of foodborne diseases. Although our summer picnics are “prime time” for foodborne illness, illnesses directly attributed to food increase sharply during the winter holiday season. Noroviruses, often referred to as the “stomach flu” or “winter flu”, are responsible for half the nation’s food-borne illnesses, and typically increase in frequency during the winter months.


Though we want to honor our family traditions, we cannot rely on cooking and serving methods that were used 50 years ago. We know more today than yesteryear on what causes foodborne illnesses and what we can institute to decrease or eliminate their occurrences all together.

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The winter holiday time is a time for many of us to celebrate, and the parties never seem to be in short supply. Make sure that the gifts you exchange are not the dangerous bacteria that cause foodborne illness.

When in the midst of the festivities and food preparation, we may forget the basic tenants of food safety. Though your family recipe for stuffing may be tasty, if it's accompanied by harmful bacteria it can really place a damper on the holidays. Remember, bacteria are not invited guests, but they lurk in your kitchen ready to sit down with you at the dinner table. Below are some basic food safety tips to help reduce the risk of illness and ensure the meal is not only delicious but safe.

Food Handling: Before and after handling foods always wash your hands with warm soapy water for 15-20 seconds. Keep kitchen counters clean and sanitized. Wash food-contact surfaces (cutting boards, dishes, utensils, countertops) with hot, soapy water after preparing each food item. Use paper towels to clean food contact surfaces. This will reduce the possibilities of cross-contamination. Do not put cooked foods on plates that previously held raw meat or poultry.

Thawing: Place frozen poultry in a pan and allow it to thaw slowly in the refrigerator.

Cooking: We have traditionally stuffed our turkeys with our family's secret stuffing recipes. Unfortunately, many cases of holiday timed foodborne illness have been directly related to the stuffing and not the turkey. Stuffing has a tendency to insulate the turkey causing the internal (the most important part) area of the bird not to reach the safe temperature zone. Additionally, the stuffing itself becomes contaminated by raw juices and never reaches the same temperature of the bird, allowing bacteria to grow within the moist and only "warm" environment of the stuffing. Food safety experts recommend that you cook stuffing separately on the stove top then add it to the fully cooked turkey for presentation. This not only keeps the stuffing moist but it lowers the risk of improper cooking temperature. If you must cook the stuffing within the turkey ensure the stuffing reaches the same internal safe temperature of the turkey: 165°F.

Food	Minimum Internal Temperature
Whole products: beef, roasts, steak, chops, pork, lamb, veal	145°F
Ground products: beef, pork, poultry, lamb, veal	155°F
Poultry (chicken, turkey), wild game, stuffed meats, stuffed fish, stuffed pasta, stuffing cooked inside the poultry	165°F

Holding: Keep hot foods HOT at 140°F or warmer; Keep cold foods COLD at 41°F or colder. Use shallow pans (less than 4") and containers for better temperature distribution throughout the product.

Leftovers: Heat leftovers thoroughly to 165°F.

Room Temperature: Discard or refrigerate foods that have been at room temperature for more than four hours.

Additional Information and specific turkey thawing and cooking temperatures are available at: <http://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcphc/Documents/program-and-policy-support/Food-Temperatures.pdf>

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